

# Dermatitis in Cats

A guide to Feline allergic skin conditions

## Dermatitis

Dermatitis means inflammation of the skin. Many clients also talk to us about their cats having eczema, which from a medical point of view also means inflammation of the skin. These terms are purely descriptive in that they tell us what we see; hair loss, soreness, possibly oozing or discharge and almost invariably an itch. Some cases will occur as a single episode, in case of allergic dermatitis it can be seasonal, or it may wax and wane all year round. However what this does not tell us is the cause of the signs and this is where it all becomes very tricky.

## Possible causes of dermatitis

There are many different causes of dermatitis, these are:

- a) Parasitic infestations: mites, fleas and tick bites
- b) Microbial infections: bacteria, yeasts and fungi
- c) Allergic dermatitis: food allergy, (inherited) atopic dermatitis and contact allergy
- d) Immune mediated conditions, which are rare

## Diagnosis

The skin has very limited means of responding to disease. This means that it is very difficult to tell the exact underlying cause of dermatitis just by examining the patient.

It may take several visits, sometimes even weeks, to reach a definite diagnosis in persistent cases which are usually allergic. This can be a frustrating and difficult time but it is essential to hang on in there and work, with us, as team to get the bottom of what is causing your cat's problems. The key to successful management is accurate diagnosis and in the long term this will benefit our sore itchy friend.

## Clues to diagnosis

There are a number of clues which can help us point in the right direction to get to the bottom of a particular case:

- ❖ Breed: certain breeds are prone to developing allergic disease, e.g. Siamese and Burmese are prone to developing allergies.
- ❖ The age at which the dermatitis started is a key clue; classically a cat with an inherited allergy will start to develop signs at 4-7 years of age. The area of the body that is affected, e.g. fleas typically causes dermatitis along the top of the back and food allergy typically causes an intense itch of the face, head and front paws.
- ❖ The response to treatment. For example, allergic dermatitis is very sensitive to anti-inflammatory doses of steroids and affected cats will stop scratching with a few

days. It is often frustrating for owners, and the vet as well, when a cat does not respond to appropriate treatment - however don't panic as sometimes this can give vital clues in itself, e.g. cats with a food allergy do not respond to steroids so sometimes this lack of response can help point us in the right direction.

- ❖ In contact pets and owners. If other pets or even the owners are also affected by dermatitis this will sometimes point towards something passing from one animal to another or even to humans. If you develop a rash at the same time as your dog, you should make an appointment to see your G.P.
- ❖ Most people associate scratching with itchiness but it is worth mentioning that cats very often secretive itches and may also bite, lick or chew themselves.

### **Investigations to obtain a diagnosis**

Typically investigations are required to reach a final diagnosis in cases which recur or fail to respond to treatment as we would expect. This is a case of gradually ruling out the different causes one by one. A diagnosis of inherited allergy is reached when all other possible causes of the dermatitis have been ruled out.

A common misconception is that we can diagnose allergy by carrying out blood tests, however this not the case. Although blood tests are available to help identify potential allergens in dogs, in cats the reliability of the blood test is still under investigation. There is also no conclusive scientific evidence that it is possible to identify food allergies by testing a blood sample.

### **Treatment**

So, once we have diagnosed what the problem is, how can we best help your pet? This will depend on the nature of the allergy:

**a) Parasitic infestations** We use very effective, broad spectrum anti parasitic spot on medications (Stronghold). In cats it is essential to maintain year round flea control, as partial protection can cause an allergy to worsen.

**b) Infections** Courses of antibiotics may be required to resolve infections very effectively.

**c) Food allergy** This is a rare condition but we do see occasional cases. The scientific evidence suggests the only way to diagnose this condition is by feeding a home cooked or commercial hypoallergenic diet for a period of 6-8 weeks with absolutely no other food sources. This can be problematic in cats who have access to the outdoors and live with other feline companions. Diagnosis is confirmed by resolution of signs and relapse when your pet is challenged with his 'normal' food. There are commercial diets available, and we recommend Purina HA that can be fed long term to affected individuals but over time cats can relapse. This is a complicated condition which is difficult to diagnose.

**d) Inherited 'atopic' dermatitis** This is an inherited form of allergy where the cat develops inappropriate immune reactions to minute particles that float around in the atmosphere all the time: typically pollens or house dust mite faeces. This is a lifelong condition which has no cure but it is possible to manage most cases very well so they have a good quality of life. In this case

there are two main routes to treatment which at times may overlap;

- ❖ Medical management There are whole books devoted to this subject but broadly speaking some or all of: Anti-inflammatory medications both by tablet and injection, shampoos, food supplements, with treatment of concurrent infections etc.
  
- ❖ Immunotherapy This means identifying the causal allergens and giving injections of a pure form of what the patient is allergic to, gradually increasing dose up to a point where the cat is having one injection a month. Research shows that some, but all not cats, can respond very well to the injections, but where this is effective life-long treatment is required .

Often it is a case of finding out what works best for your own cat, we will always try and keep medications to the lowest possible effective dose and are very happy to discuss and development a treatment plan with you.